Neutralizing Temporary Inequities in Moral Status: Chinese Street Singers and the Gift Economy

Abstract

The cash tips that audience members offer to singers are a central part of the informal performances of popular songs held daily in public spaces of Wuhan, China. The singing, plus various forms of attention and material offerings, temporarily raise performers' moral status over audience members, inspiring reciprocal obligations that are neutralized by the giving of cash. By understanding the money as gifts rather than as part of transactions I explore the interpersonal dimensions of economic dealings around the music. Reciprocal obligations, rather than notions of collective belonging, are the main focal point for social meaning here.

Introduction

It is a weekday afternoon in October 2014 on a street in Wuhan, China. Five female singers are struggling to establish an attentive audience as they take turns to perform famous Chinese pop songs for people passing by. The local police in this provincial capital city have recently moved the organizers of this informal show on from their usual location in a small green space, responding to complaints from residents nearby about the noise. Today, they have set up for the first time on a wide but busy section of footpath next to a major road and a bus stop, trying out the location as they search for a new home. The organizers have managed to convince these few singers to follow them to this new place today, but several more who used to be regulars have dispersed to join other shows closer to the original location. The new spot chosen, however, does not appear conducive, with pedestrians hurrying past in both directions and barely anyone

stopping to listen. The next to take the microphone, Taozi,[1] is not a confident singer and she is playing it safe by choosing to sing "Hongchen qingge" (The ballad of the red dust, from 2011), one of the most commonly heard and best received songs on the streets. Still, she feels the need to offer a disclaimer to the handful of people paying attention before she begins the song: "I don't sing very well, so don't laugh and please support me" (October 11, 2014). Unlike at more established shows in the city there is no live band here, and she is accompanied by a backing track played through a smart phone that is plugged into the PA system. Taozi's voice is shaky; the key of the recording clearly does not suit her range and she struggles with the low notes at the beginning of the song. This performance stands out to me as sub-par in comparison with the other singers here today, and as she gets into the second half of the song, she is facing the highly unusual prospect in this kind of street performance of not receiving any gifts of cash from the audience.

Eventually a middle-aged man emerges from the flow of people walking past and stops to hand her 300 *yuan* as she continues to sing. It is an amount of money towards the higher end of the range of gifts typically given to street singers in Wuhan; in one moment she has just earned about a tenth of the monthly salary I note at the time being advertised for entry-level jobs in the city's restaurants and shops. Gifts like this are how these women make their living, and on a day with so little success, this relatively substantial sum is probably the largest single one any singer will achieve. The eyes of the other performers light up and one follows the gift-giver as he walks back to his place, finding that he has been watching the show while perched on the seat of his motor scooter parked about 20 meters away, unnoticed in the flow of people. This second performer tries to persuade him to come closer and join the fledgling audience circle, but he clearly refuses. After the song, I watch Taozi also approach the man, to offer customary thanks

for his gift, and they talk for a few minutes before he rides off on his scooter. A little while later, I look around for Taozi and find that she has left too; she does not return for the rest of the singing session, which lasts another hour or so. Why was the man not interested in joining the audience to listen to more of the music, instead only briefly watching from a distance? Was it her shaky singing performance that inspired that 300-*yuan* gift, or something else in the relationship between the two? Do incidents like this hint at the reason people had warned me in the past to stay clear of Taozi, calling her a *gonggong qiche*, a "public bus," sexually available to anyone willing to pay?

Practices by which members of the audience give cash gifts to singers are at the very heart of the dozen or so street music events like this one I found dotted around public spaces of Wuhan's inner districts. The centrality of money is encapsulated in the label often attached to street performance more generally in China: *maiyi* or sometimes *maichang*, literally "selling art" or "selling singing." Financial exchange is somewhat present as a theme in a few Chinese-language articles interested in other kinds of street music around the country (Zeng 2002; Yang 2006), this work apparently inspired by investigations of street music in the United States by prominent Chinese ethnomusicologist Luo Qin (2001). There is also some scholarship in English (Chan 2005; Lee 2009; Jeffreys and Wang 2012; Wong 2016), although in most of the contexts addressed in this work, money does not play such a prominent role in the spectacle as it does in Wuhan. Here, cash is given to singers in ritualistic displays that nod to certain historical practices in Chinese opera (ZXZBW 1993), involving the presentation of flowers that spectators pick up on their way to the front of the makeshift stage area, or bundles of small-denomination bills scattered into the air above the singer's head as if confetti. Almost every one of the hundreds of songs I saw performed at more than 50 of these amateur events in different settings in Wuhan

during 2014 attracted somewhere between a handful of these gifts and a constant flow throughout its duration. Many of the sums handed over ostensibly as recognition and reward for performances struck me as out of proportion with what might be expected considering the setting and quality of the shows. While a few of the most professionally presented events have semi-permanent stages with good quality sound systems, large video screens and sophisticated stage lighting, most make do with far more basic and much older equipment that is brought out each day to cramped and dusty corners. The singing, too, ranges in quality, but virtually all performers are united in describing what they do as "amateur" (*yeyu*) both in conversation with me and when talking on the microphone between songs. Most also said they had no background in performing before they arrived at the shows. The experience of one singer called Ganzi is typical here; she told me that she had come to Wuhan from a nearby town in this province, Hubei, but had not found satisfactory work so had approached an event organizer to let her join the roster of singers. She still held a desire to start a small business, possibly even set up her own stage, but was struggling to put together finances to do so (pers. comm., November 6, 2014). One afternoon, I bumped into her as she was leaving a singing session, and she told me disappointedly that she had only made 200 *yuan*.[2] More commonly, however, singers can leave a stint of two or three songs on the microphone with earnings well above 1,000 *yuan* and generally have two or three turns on the stage during each afternoon or evening session.

In any case, though, the livings singers generate are on a scale far beyond the earnings of other kinds of street musician in Wuhan, such as buskers. Indeed, the extent and centrality of the money-giving is the main reason I think of these performances as distinct from other street forms, along with the fact that they usually maintain a core dedicated audience over sessions lasting several hours per day, rather than drawing a purely transitory one. Some participants call

the events *jiqing guangchang* or "passion square." The word *guangchang* refers to the public city plaza, and it links the activity to a participatory leisure phenomenon far more widespread across China of *guangchang wu* square dancing, which also occurs in these plazas and similar public spaces (Huang 2016; Seetoo and Zou 2016; Chao 2017). A middle-aged man introduced to me as Great Master Gao,[3] on account of his many years of experience as a keyboard player, had been in the accompanying "house bands" of the singing sessions in Wuhan for more than five years. I went on to shadow him at many shows; he always ushered me into a seat beside his keyboard and we talked about the performances between songs and over dinner afterwards. He told me that he believed *jiqing guangchang* now to be exclusive to this city, the phenomenon having spread from Fujian province on China's east coast to several other places in the 1990s before subsequently fading elsewhere (pers. comm., November 20, 2014).

I concentrate on the practices of gift-giving in this article as they are the focal point around which the shows take shape as social occasions. Attracting cash gifts is the main preoccupation for the performers, and I will explain later how this becomes evident both when they address the audience from the stage, and also during their extensive efforts to build relationships with individuals in the audience as they mix together. Master Gao spoke of the "commercial character" (*maoyi xingzhi*) that he had seen arise in these performances, and he linked this to a radical increase in the value of gifts exchanged; when the shows first began in Wuhan in the 1990s, he told me, individual gifts were similar in value to those given to buskers, usually up to 10 *yuan* (pers. comm., November 20, 2014). This observation touches on my interest in the economic sides of these music performances: How can the centrality of the gift-giving be explained and what is the significance of the values being of this higher order? What does the commercial character of the shows say about the kinds of relationships that performers

and audience members share? And perhaps more widely significant: How do these gift-giving practices comment on music that stands at the apex of monetary exchange and face-to-face dealings? My aim is to contribute to, and to explore in context, theory surrounding the interpersonal orientations of music's economic realms, and to consider what this might add to understandings of music performance's wider social significances.

Although the musical material and its delivery are not my main concerns in this article, there are still links to familiar themes from popular music scholarship, not least because singers here perform a canon of classic Chinese pop songs from the 1980s up to the present. The performances, thus, rely directly on the constellation of processes and patterns that constitute the formal music industry and the mass media landscape. For instance, they respond to and participate in trends regarding the popularity of certain styles, modes of expression, artists and songs. This was highly evident to me when in the field in the autumn of 2014, the time that a craze for a recent release called "Xiao pingguo" (Little apple) was sweeping China (Stock 2016). Not only did the commercial recording of the song seem to play whenever I turned on the television or walked into a shop, but I also saw audiences cheer and passers-by rush to listen when a street singer announced that they were about to give their own rendition; formal and informal manifestations of popular music are apparently implicated in common trends. Scholarship on Chinese popular music is rich with analysis linking music products like the "Xiao pingguo" record to larger demographic and economic questions, production processes, marketing and broadcasting. One major preoccupation, for example, has been the intersections of identity issues such as gender and nationality with economic choices in the careers of prominent popular musicians (Witzleben 1999; Fung and Curtin 2002; Fung 2008, 2013; Groenewegen 2009). A long-standing focus is how rock stars have negotiated the state's involvement in the music

industry and market (Jones 1991; Efird 2001; Hao 2001, 2003; Baranovitch 2003; de Kloet 2005), and more recently there has been interest in televised singing competitions as mass-mediated experiences (Jian and Liu 2009; Fung 2013; Huang 2014).

But while these street performances in Wuhan are indirectly linked to issues in which record companies, media platforms and governments are major actors, their profit-orientation primarily plays out in a quite different sphere, one of face-to-face dealings between individuals known to each other. The small-scale nature of the events breeds the possibility for performers and audiences to share repeated one-to-one contact over weeks, months or longer, and to develop relationships. The largest audiences peak at little more than a hundred spectators and, more commonly, crowds consist of a few handfuls of people. In contrast to some prominent work that discusses money-giving in music performance (Qureshi 1986; Waterman 1990; Wallach 2008; Mitchell 2011, 2015; Bader and Richter 2014), here the practices are the raison d'être for the performances rather than a side effect of a performance's place in a religious ritual or wedding celebration. They bring to mind music performances in some tourist contexts too, with scholars here often primarily choosing to look beyond the immediate interactions among participants to pursue issues such as hybridity in musical material or minority group identity (Rees 2000; Chan 2015).

My approach, though, is to highlight social and cultural sides of the economic orientations of this music-making by focusing on that which occurs between people in the performance sphere. I understand the economic dealings here not as exchanges or transactions, labels connoting detachment and mass replication. Instead, I tie them to a phenomenon I introduce below, one involving short-term moral status concerns. Briefly for now, this means paying attention to how an imperative of reciprocity is established between performers and

audience members through aspects of on-stage performance and interpersonal contact, and how it is then neutralized through the gifting of money. The singing and the various ways performers bestow company and good wishes on audience members are highlighted at the shows as investments of labor and personal commitment. Drawing on a branch of scholarship that has developed on ideas from the sociologist Erving Goffman ([1963] 1990) about stigma, I understand these offerings as part of participants' "moral experience" (Yang et al. 2007). This means that they belong to the "register of everyday life and practical engagement that defines what matters most for ordinary men and women" (ibid.: 1528). In other words, they are dealings in which at stake may be highly meaningful ups and downs in issues such as money, status, life chances and relationships (ibid.).

By building on this idea of moral experience to talk about "inequities in moral status," I refer to the gaps between gift givers' short-term gains and recipients' temporary losses in the ups and downs that are of consequence in this social world (ibid.). "Inequities" seems the appropriate word because these are discrepancies that cannot ordinarily be felt and then ignored, and instead they demand swift rebalancing action – the initial gift being repaid in a suitable way (Yang 2013, 23). I describe, then, a level of status negotiation that is constantly shifting, one that exists in conjunction with – but on top of – the more enduring *social* status that shapes dealings between people based on various measures of value in their relative life positions. I explain throughout the article that the negotiation of this moral status is significant as the primarily mechanism binding individuals into ongoing one-to-one dealings and also shaping collective levels of experience with the music here.

I found that participating in some elements of this gift economy myself gave me the most direct insight into the dynamics underlying these exchanges, through experiencing how

performers and audience members represented themselves to me, how their responses to me changed when I engaged in certain ways, and how I felt subjected to certain pressures and obligations. My discussions here, then, are largely based on reflections about my own involvements, and on examination of the interactions and conversations with performers and audience members that resulted during the shows themselves.

Street performances and music scenes in Wuhan

On Wuhan's streets, an audience member's action of delivering money to a performer is known as *dacai* (打采 or 打彩), an idiomatic combination of the multipurpose verb *da*, whose uses include conveying bodily actions, and *cai*¸ meaning color, variety, winnings and so on. As a whole, then, the phrase expresses the bestowing of some kind of splendor, and the use of language is significant for bringing to the surface of these events a connection with historical ways of conceptualizing the relationships between performers and audiences in Chinese performing arts. In the *huagu* opera traditions local to the regions around Wuhan, for instance, the phrase *dacai* has also described audience members throwing money to artists (ZXZBW 1993, 477). At the end of performances of tragic operas, itinerant performance troupes would kneel at the front of the stage to ask for traveling expenses or charity (ibid.). Crucially, the street performances of interest in this article take on the idea that the gift is primarily an expression of sympathy, that it is mainly linked to dynamics of interpersonal relations while only sometimes also communicating praise for a pleasing performance. Money-giving at these street performances is most significant as a constituent of, and window onto, the realities of moral relations between people, rather than as something directly tied to musical judgements.

The value of cash gifts on the contemporary streets (and indeed the very decision of a spectator to offer a singer money) is at the discretion of the giver, albeit constrained by conventions operating in different places and at different times. In afternoon sessions, large gifts (in multiples of 100 *yuan*) and smaller ones (from 10 to 50 *yuan*) are both common, while in evening sessions (particularly at larger and better equipped shows) individual gifts of at least several hundred *yuan* are the norm, and anything less than 100 *yuan* is rarely seen. To place this in context, it is worth noting that one might also pay a few hundred *yuan* for a ticket to a leading Chinese pop star's arena concert or for other music events of a similar scale. These worlds of formally commercial music felt very distant during my time in the field. But if the distinction was obvious to me, this was not necessarily shared by all participants. When I expressed surprise that ordinary people should regularly give such large sums in the circumstances, Mr Wang, someone I met often in the audience at one particular street music location, responded: "It's quite normal with China's consumer economy these days" (pers. comm., May 13, 2014). He elaborated by relating the gifts to the prices charged for drinks and entertainment in night life venues, and thus reinforced my puzzlement that these street performances should be considered comparable to settings of formal commerce.

A crucial part of the distinction from these other contexts is linked, for me, to the different degrees of centrality that wider collective identities take in different forms of music activity. In the street shows, it is hard to identify obvious focal points for collective belonging in the same way that these emerge in accounts of other local music contexts in China. Illustrations of this divergence come out strongly, for instance, in scholarship on contemporary underground music scenes in Wuhan and elsewhere. Jeroen Groenewegen-Lau quotes rock singer Gao Hu's assessments of China's underground scene in the early 2000s. While explaining that its

development was hampered particularly by poorly equipped venues, Gao also touches on issues of belonging: “Only recently things started to improve, especially in south Chinese cities such as Wuhan, where Vox has been building a community for years” (quoted in Groenewegen-Lau 2014, 24). Gao refers here to the 600-capacity venue Vox Livehouse, one of Wuhan’s most famous marks on China’s current music landscape. Non-mainstream bands and artists of various styles play for crowds occupying a quite different place on the spectrum from the street pop audiences. While the latter are made up of casual older listeners, the former are mainly students and other young people of a creative bent.

Various touring musicians I have interviewed as part of a side project collecting different perspectives about performing in Wuhan seem to agree with Gao’s feelings about Vox, expressing clear ideas about the kind of community of which the venue is part. One, a member of a Swedish punk rock band, notes Vox’s contribution to making Wuhan “an exception [within China] because of its more allowing environment for subculture” (Jacob Lundtofte, interview, July 17, 2015). Another, an Irish folk musician continues: “It’s really lucky to have a significant population of youth culture enthusiasts in its local audience compared to other places in China” (John Carroll, interview, January 31, 2015). And by noting thriving youth subculture as the lifeblood and also partly a consequence of Vox’s presence, these musicians reinforce findings from Jeroen de Kloet’s study on rock scenes in the country (2010). De Kloet highlights the self-consciousness by which shared commitment to the wider ideologies around youth music movements and lifestyles underpin a range of rock activity. Despite being divided into “separate scenes that are supposedly different,” he notes that there is a pervasive awareness among musicians and audiences that a bigger picture is “held together by the same beliefs in rock”

(2010, 193). Part of this, as de Kloet argues, is the intensity of a shared rejection of the *other*, in this case mainstream pop music (ibid.).

The discussions that follow here are meant to complement the idea that the primary social meaning of performance in these scenes is founded on collective belonging, often a belonging articulated along ideological lines. An alternative locus of social meaning emerges more strongly in the specific circumstances of the street singing. I explain later, for instance, that the gifting of money here is the crowd's main method for displaying solidarity with performers (as opposed to other engagements, such as applause or dancing) and that this rests on individual rather than collective orientations prevailing. Rather, then, than my primary focus being participants' understandings of themselves as belonging to a wider collective, my starting point is the meaning playing out in moral status dealings between individuals who respond directly to each other, and I consider how this meaning radiates out into collective concerns.

The gift economy

With money-oriented practices being so central to the music performances, these shows seem to invite association with the language of commodities and transactions, and with ways of understanding musical life through reference to markets and the "culture industry" (Adorno 1991). The underlying premise of these approaches is that capitalistic commodification places music into relationships with power structures that breed alienation from human concerns, including sentiment (Stokes 2002, 146), creativity (Benedict 2009), and locality (Krims 2007). Calling this "a simplistic reading of Marx," though, Martin Stokes (2002, 139) argues it is not sufficient to assume that the involvement of money merely "erod[es] the bonds of sociality that music plays such an important role in forming" (ibid., 146). Instead money might actually be

intertwined with these bonds between people. This idea builds on classic sociology from Marcel Mauss, whose study of gift-related practices in various societies suggests that the giving and receiving of material assets can carry affective dimensions that contribute to rather than undermine affinities between people: "things have values which are emotional as well as material" (Mauss [1954] 1974, 63).

I channel this idea through reference to what has become widely understood as a significant dynamic of contemporary Chinese societies, the "gift economy," which is theorized prominently by the anthropologist Mayfair Yang. Yang explains this as the ingrained process by which to accomplish a business or personal goal, someone in a Chinese society might first offer a gift to an individual in a position to influence the situation. This is an act designed to instigate an ongoing negotiation of inequities in moral status between those involved; it attaches a temporarily raised moral status to the giver of the gift and a sense of indebtedness to the receiver, the situation only equalized when the receiver repays the gift in material form or by providing some kind of assistance to contribute to the original giver achieving their goal (Yang 1989). The value of the initial gift does not carry the same objectivity as items exchanged in commodity transactions, whose pricing logics involve, in Marxist terms, not only their "use value" to humans but also their "exchange value," which factors in the surplus that is said to result from how production is organized (ibid., 37; Olmsted 2002, 108). The influence on interpersonal dealings that these gifts exert carries a weight not directly linked to their monetary value, but instead it rests on this negotiation of moral status, the forging and neutralizing of the sense of personal indebtedness. This way of understanding dealings in Chinese societies addresses suspicions that material exchanges necessarily imply a detachment; the gift is "never totally

alienated from the donor since he or she still has a hold on the gift in the form of a moral right to something in exchange for the gift" (Yang 1989, 38).

Yang situates the phrase "gift economy" mainly in the realm of government officialdom where people might manipulate *guanxi* (literally meaning "relationships") by giving gifts to individuals in positions of influence. I found no evidence in Wuhan's street music shows that this kind of orientation to external goals is a major concern here. My use of "gift economy," instead, describes how the temporary inequities in moral status that Yang highlights are forged and neutralized all within the social sphere of the performance event. My discussion in this article will unfold on the basis that these negotiations are the key mechanisms of monetary dealings through which interpersonal meaning is fed rather than suppressed.

With this, I intend to dissociate the gift-giving at Wuhan's street performances from the language of exchanges and transactions. Ana Hofman has argued that it need not be musical sounds or material artifacts that constitute the main currency in commodified music contexts. Instead, she highlights "affective labor" and identifies as a key feature of music-making "the ability to build social networks based on shared sonic affect" (Hofman 2015, 31). In other words, music might be implicated indirectly in a *feeling* being "bought" and "sold"; consumers may be motivated to spend money because of a sense of belonging or a particular kind of collective experience to which music allows them access. As Simon McKerrell puts it about music in the context of traditional heritage, "*music* is not the commodity; in essence, the affective qualities and the feelings experienced through participation in traditional music performance become the commodity exchanged" (McKerrell forthcoming). This approach brings proper acknowledgement of the role of interpersonal encounter in commodified music contexts. On Wuhan's streets, though, even this way of extending the idea of transactional exchange does not

properly describe the dynamics. Here, I understand gifts not as the products of an active "consumer" mindset in which givers make rational choices to maximize the benefits they can accrue from their budget of disposable cash. Instead, the gifts are *responses* to perceived obligations and opportunities; the shows establish a sense that there is a duty to fulfil expectations in an interpersonal dynamic, and the audience member takes a more passive role.

I make reference here and later to research from contexts of sexualized entertainment, such as strip clubs, karaoke venues and hotels used by prostitutes. Sociologist Elizabeth Wood (2000) adds detail to the idea of transactions being transcended, highlighting the cash given by customers to attract one-to-one attention from dancers in American strip clubs. She notes an apparent dissonance between the pleasure customers derive from the attention of dancers, and the inescapable knowledge that this attention is bound up in a financial relationship between the two. In other words, understanding patrons as *buying* the feeling of being involved in a genuine exchange of sexual energy does not stand up to scrutiny, because the presence of the cash itself reminds them that this is probably not the case. Wood concludes that the gift-givers do not understand their cash as being involved in a purchase transaction, but instead that they consider it a reward, gift, or gesture of goodwill; they see themselves as "contributing to the dancer's financial security rather than as taking part in a fee-for-service interaction" (ibid., 13). Hence, despite the commercial settings of these practices, these are genuine gifts with interpersonal dimensions that must be understood.

I learned from participants in Wuhan that, in a similar way, gifts are not seen primarily as offered in direct response to the singing, to a pleasing performance, or to the choice of song. In general, my more direct attempts at asking audience members to rationalize their reasons for giving money unearthed an elusive constellation of factors; I found it impossible to disentangle

positivity towards a singer's song from her appearance, her personality, and various other things. My interactions with singers at the shows were often more revealing. At one evening event, a singer called Longzi confided in me that her performances were not being rewarded as she thought they should. She told me with pride of being virtually unique among her colleagues as a graduate of a performing arts school, and she felt that warm applause and compliments from audiences were evidence of the superior quality of her singing. It was clear and distressing to Longzi that singing quality was powerless to break exclusive relationships already established between potential givers and other individual singers (pers. comm., November 16, 2014). It was quite plain to me, though, that the singer was also playing up this sense of injustice to attract my sympathy.

Perhaps equally conscious of the image of herself that she was presenting to me, another performer, A-jia, gave a slightly different take. She told me that her experience after arriving in Wuhan several months before was unusual because she had immediately attracted a good level of gifts. A-jia believed that she had been able to access a normally overlooked section of the audience of very long-term members and women, who came to enjoy the music with no strings attached, but acknowledged that this was not the case for most of her colleagues, who relied almost entirely on the loyalty of those they got to know in the crowds (pers. comm., October 27, 2014). A similar phenomenon was emphasized to me when I witnessed a few of the early performances of a new singer who had just arrived in the city. I noted in November 2014 that this newcomer gave an unusually strong vocal performance of the song "Weile shei" (For whom). This song is a contemporary take on a revolutionary-era eulogy, highlighting sacrifices made in response to severe Yangtze River flooding in 1998, and it received the best round of applause I ever heard at an event. Despite this, the fact that only one person offered a gift made

the song far from a public success, and at the end the emcee gave the singer an extended pep talk on the microphone, implying that she still had much to learn to become an effective performer in this context. What the singers do here is clearly far more than simply "selling singing."

Stokes adds a wider social dimension to understanding the efficacy of on-stage activity: "what is important is not just musical performance, but good performance, if music and dance are to make a social event 'happen'" (Stokes 1994, 5). Bearing in mind the observations I have just made about the limited impact of strong singing, is this concern for *socially powerful* performance useful in this context? First, it is worth noting that the impression I have presented so far of the extensive and showy gift-giving does not fully represent the wider ethos of the shows. Audiences typically engage far less demonstratively; spectators virtually never move to the music or sing along, nor do they ordinarily express appreciation effusively. It is far more typical for audience members to stare silently and impassively towards the stage than to show any signs of being stirred or actively engaged. Some even commented to me about their indifference to the particular music played, and I began to suspect that replacing the music with another genre or even with a different activity entirely might still be compatible with the gift economy here.

In fact, many in audiences actively shun contact with performers. Numerous times I witnessed individuals refuse to shake a singer's hand or saw them move away as a singer approached, and against this background, the gift-giving seems all the more incongruous. That it reliably goes on apparently regardless of the wider success of the shows, however, seems to suggest that the social event does not really need to "happen" or to be widely effervescent to activate the gift economy here. Just as the details of the musical expression are not the primary currency of the gift economy, the intensity of the collective experience is also less important. If

the gift economy is not really about "selling singing," it does not seem to be primarily about selling a collective experience either. Taking moral status as my main concern instead does not mean that I neglect the collective level of experience. In fact as I explain below, seeing gifts through the lens of moral experience looks outwards to various kinds of competition and validation involving the wider body of participants, and thus this approach also liberates my understanding of the money-giving from the bilaterality that may still be implied in the transaction model.

Gift-giving and performer-audience relationships

The moment an audience member presents a singer with a tip is a point of intersection between the musical performance and an extended world of interpersonal interaction and personal relationships. A cash gift from an audience member is often a means by which they become noticed and establish contact with a singer, and the response to a gift from a stranger in the audience has multiple stages. The sequence I observed during a street-side show on October 31 2014 was typical. It was the early stages of the night and the performers were working particularly hard to gather and enthuse an embryonic audience. I watched as a man nonchalantly slipped a 100-*yuan* bill into a container at the front of the stage, unnoticed by the singer. Keen to capitalize on this interaction as a way of building the spectacle, the emcee retrieved the bill and waved it above his head, thanking and praising the giver repeatedly. While still mid-song, the singer took this cue to enter the audience circle looking for the giver. The man tried to shy away among the crowds, but others pointed him out, and the singer handed him a bottle of iced tea in thanks. This first stage of the response is typically followed up when singers finish their song and they thank and praise givers during a moment of on-microphone conversation with the

emcee. Often they mention individual givers by surname, wishing them prosperity, success in business, long life, health and wellbeing, happiness and so on. A third stage of recognition for the gift occurs as the show continues in the hands of the next performer. In this case, I saw the original singer leave the stage area and approach the giver of the 100 *yuan* to exchange a few words of thanks, slipping a packet of cigarettes into his jacket pocket and placing a stool in front of him as a marker of special treatment, although the man chose to remain standing with the vast majority of those around him. Contact details might be exchanged, and yet another step in the process of recognition sees similar conversations continue in the form of text messages and online communication, the first steps towards the development of an ongoing relationship between the two.

As sessions come to an end, nearby eateries fill up with groups of men invited to dinner by singers with whom they become acquainted through the giving of a tip, and similar gifts from the men at subsequent performances maintain these relationships. Singers also spend much of their daytime hours before a performance entertaining members of audiences, inviting them for meals on a one-to-one basis. I myself met with singers before afternoon and evening performances, and found it remarkable that they were always on the phone arranging their next appointment with an audience member before we had parted. Thus, money given during the performance is part of cycles of ongoing reciprocity, involving attention and company, along with meals and various kinds of return material gifts, and it entwines the two parties together into developing personal relationships. As Master Gao asked rhetorically about the spectators: “If they don’t get these gifts, what reason do they have to give the singer money next time?” (pers. comm., November 20, 2014). The second half of this article will be concerned with illustrating how the prospect of these interpersonal dealings colors much of the contact between singers and

audiences. If, though, the gift economy here is less about any form of transaction than about negotiations of moral status, then how can incidents like the one involving the singer Taozi described at the beginning of this article be interpreted? My contacts' insinuations about Taozi's reputation illustrate a perception that sex can be a factor in the gift-giving practices and thus the social world here. How exactly, then, does sex fit into the picture of the interpersonal relationships that I continue to build?

Sex and gender in the gift economy

Bemoaning the modest financial rewards that she found at her stage, Ganzi explained to me a feeling that she was at a major disadvantage in comparison with most of her colleagues. She told me that she was one of only a few singers not to "sell their dignity and honor" (*chumai zijide zunyan*) to help generate tips (pers. comm., November 6, 2014). Longzi also spoke to me of the "demands" (*yaoqiu*), the strings some men attached to their gifts, and euphemistically noted that virtually all of the other singers she knew were all more "open" (*kaifang*) than her (pers. comm., November 16, 2014). Indeed, quite often an air of innuendo would color my conversations with audience members. On one occasion I happened to bump into my audience contact Mr Wang on the other side of town from the event he frequented. Mr Wang split his time between Wuhan, where his business was, and life with his wife and family in a distant city. When conversation turned to the performances, he unconvincingly claimed to have resolved to stay away from the temptations there, and he teased me about the motives behind my interest in the female singers: "you go then, throw your money at them!" (pers. comm., October 9, 2014). Sometimes these insinuations became more direct assertions. On one occasion, for example, I was watching a show in the company of Longzi when the event's organizer took the apparently unusual step of

joining in with the gift-giving to the singer on stage. Speaking close to my ear to make herself heard over the music, she volunteered knowingly the explanation that the singer and boss had *shuiguojiao,* slept together (pers. comm., November 16, 2014). I was confronted quite consistently by the possibility that a hidden (and sometimes less-than-hidden) sexual world might help account for what I still saw as the inflated cash gifts flowing at the performances. Indeed, I had to consider that it might also be an important factor in social behavior at the events more generally.

Obviously striking is the asymmetry in the roles that men and women play. The clear majority of participants in almost every role – spectators, organizers, backing musicians and emcees – are men, usually middle-aged or older. Only the position of singer is dominated by women, mainly (but not all) in their twenties. The fact that performers are young women is undoubtedly part of the appeal of their shows to the predominantly older male audience. Indeed, the showy ways in which cash tips are delivered by men to women is reminiscent of forms of entertainment in which sex is a more overt focus. In the US strip clubs and similar venues already mentioned, there are suggestions that through jobs here some women find opportunities to supplement their incomes by occasionally (or more regularly) having sex with customers (Prus and Irini 1980; Ronai and Ellis 1989). Implied in the incident at the beginning of this article involving the singer Taozi is that perhaps these events in Wuhan also function as a threshold to women making money from sex, or that sometimes sleeping with spectators may become bound up with the singer's arsenal for extracting cash from the events. Being most interested in the sphere of the musical occasion itself, though, I did not make particular efforts when in the field to establish how common sexual contact between participants actually was. Indeed, although various participants told me that others were involved in these kinds of relationship, I never came

across anyone prepared to admit that they were themselves (and I was wary of making more efforts to develop the kind of intimacy that might have led to such revelations). As I touch on again later, sometimes I suspected that self-interest or malicious motivation was at play when an informant denounced other participants. Indeed, more disinterested collaborators such as Master Gao seemed as unsure of the real details of others' intimate lives as I was. When I mentioned the names of two singers I thought least likely to be involved in such activity, he replied simply "I know they are both single, but not much more than that" and added that he did not even know the marital status of most others (pers. comm., November 20, 2014). It is worth stressing, then, that I never found firm evidence to convince me what I heard about sexual relationships was any more reliable than hearsay.

The sheer prevalence of money-giving and the diversity in the characters of participants I encountered, however, made it clear that there is no direct and singular connection between a gift and sex. In fact, no connection reveals itself with any regularity on a surface level in the performances, where the expression of sexuality is invariably low key. The personal presentation of singers is always reasonably modest, reflecting a generally conservative way of behaving on the stage. Singers' clothing falls into the category of normal everyday attire for women in Wuhan, rather than that of stage costume. Occasionally, they wear unusual outfits in tandem with singing particular songs, but these are never particularly provocative. One, for instance, wore a soldier's camouflage uniform on the evening that she sang the song "Bing gege" (Army brother). Another called Wen Lian came to my attention on account of her unfussy combination of jeans, checked shirt and jacket, which contrasted with the smart and carefully chosen attire of most others. Master Gao described her character to me in glowing terms, calling her "number one in my heart" (pers. comm., November 20, 2014), and explicitly excluded her from suggestions that

performers were involved in sexual relationships with audience members. Indeed, Wen Lian was the only singer I found ever to reject money offered by audience members with whom she did not wish to be associated. Her appearance reinforced the message transmitted by all elements of her behavior that her part in the events ends at the most respectable elements, and this points to a heterogeneity in how the elements of sex and sexuality are incorporated. In general, the fact that most audiences contain a handful of young children brought along by parents, and once I was even tasked by an emcee to keep an eye on her eight-year-old daughter, shows that these events are certainly not sexualized entertainment in any open sense.

Establishing temporary inequities in moral status

It has been necessary to outline the roles of sex and gender in these performances, first to address the impressions hinted at, for instance by my audience contact Mr Wang, that the shows and the gift economy are heavily oriented towards sex. Secondly, the element of gender asymmetry that certainly does exist in roles played at the events is one of the foundations of the main discussion in this article of how temporary moral status is negotiated. Cash tips are involved in the forging, neutralizing and perpetuating of inequities in moral status, but so are a series of musical, material and rhetorical "gifts" that flow from performers to the audience and individuals within it, and these depend on the gender asymmetries in the roles played at the shows. While I consider these role asymmetries to belong to an underlying level of more enduring *social* organization and relatively permanent features of personal identity (Goffman [1959] 1990, 34), it is useful to note again that the negotiation of *moral* status involves temporary ebbs and flows, a balance that can shift back and forth several times over a session.

How exactly, then, are these temporary inequities in moral status stimulated in actual contact and communication between individuals? First, they have a directly musical dimension. Musical interludes form part of the process by which the block of two or three songs that form the main part of one singer's performance ends and gives way to the next singer's time on the stage. This occurs about every ten minutes as up to fifteen singers take turns over the roughly three hours of a typical session. These interludes can be a few bars of purely instrumental music or can feature several lines of text sung by the outgoing singer in combination with the emcee. All of the venues in Wuhan share a largely overlapping selection of a handful of interludes, and each band may add one or two unique ones. They often take a short refrain or prominent section lasting a few bars from a well-known song, and the band usually renders it as fast as possible. These short passages of music feature lyrics conveying a positive message of some kind. The most common is formed of an excerpt from a 2005 song by Liu Dehua called "Gongxi facai" (Greetings and prosperity), performed either with or without vocals (Fig. 1). The song's title is a greeting most associated with exchanges between family and acquaintances at New Year, and the words go on: "Greetings and prosperity/Congratulations and splendor/All that's good, step right up/All that's bad, get out of here/There can never be too much ceremony." Another common interlude uses part of Ouyang Feifei's 2005 song "Ganende xin" (Grateful heart), with the words: "Grateful heart, thanks to fortune/Flowers blooming and dying, I cherish them both."

[Figure 1 here]

Organizers told me that even the purely musical interludes (Fig. 2), without lyrics to express these sentiments, are created by the band specifically as a way of expressing thanks, especially after substantial cash gifts (Fangfang, pers. comm., November 22, 2014).

[Figure 2 here]

Applause between songs is not a significant feature of these shows, part of the generally subdued wider audience response already noted. As well as helping to mark and smooth over the end of a strip of activity, then, these interludes also fulfil a similar function to clapping in conveying appreciation and support. Whereas applause, however, typically sends this message from the audience to the performer, in the interludes of these performances, roles are reversed so that performers express thanks and appreciation to the audience. The music here is a key way that performers establish, on an implicit level, a sense that the shows are a platform for exchanges of goodwill, reminding audiences that performance is to be considered itself a form of gift, and that a dynamic of reciprocity is expected. By thanking the audience and introducing a discourse of generosity, they temporarily raise their own moral status, making themselves out to be benevolent and caring, and thus worthy of a moral debt being equalized.

The positive wishes and virtuous messages that these interludes convey are part of a wider picture of face-to-face communication between performers and audience members. Thus, the second way I see temporary inequities in moral status forged is through a material manifestation of the gift economy. The hospitality role that occupies the majority of performers' time at the shows mainly involves offering cigarettes and non-alcoholic drinks to their customers. Venues are bathed in smoke and cigarettes are a constant feature, seen in the mouths of many spectators, and between the fingers of backing musicians as they play their instruments. Alcohol, incidentally, is almost entirely absent. The sharing of cigarettes has been a feature of daily sociality in all walks of Chinese society (Rich and Xiao 2012), and typically a mainly male domain. Indeed, while female singers are the ones to offer cigarettes to other people at Wuhan's

street performances, I never saw any of them smoke at an event. The importance of these practices is clearly not lost on people I met in audiences. On one occasion, the men around me seemed put out by my refusal of performers' cigarettes, urging me to understand that in Chinese culture "cigarettes are number one for showing good manners [*limao*] and respect [*zunzhong*]" (anonymous, pers. comm., November 11, 2014); there was a sense that I was violating an important social contract by refusing. Almost every interaction I had with singers I knew involved an offer of a cigarette, and any man in the audience can expect to be regularly approached in this way even by singers with whom they have had no prior contact. While some singers carry a stock of chewing gum as an alternative gift, for a non-smoker, it might mean rejecting these offers at least upon each meeting with some singers, and sometimes repeatedly during a single conversation. Despite knowing that it will not be accepted, even a rejected offer of a cigarette still seems to function as a polite and attentive gesture, and one worth repeating for the moral status value singers hope it will generate.

A second role of cigarettes in the moral status negotiations of the gift economy is manifest in the less frequent gifting of whole packs. These are given more directly in response to an individual's cash gift, with singers either handing them to their regular supporters, or to a lesser-known individual immediately after a substantial tip. An alternative of roughly the same function is the bottle of soft drink, or the cup of hot drink in the winter. Many events have refreshment stalls attached, and singers buy these gifts on a tab system. A typical exchange I had with a singer who was a new acquaintance involved an initial conversation, followed by the singer returning a few minutes later, holding out a bottle of drink and with mock formality saying "Let's make friends." Reflecting practices of gift-giving in wider society at holiday times (Rich and Xiao 2012), boxes containing multiple packs of cigarettes are given, along with other

gifts of higher value, such as clothes and shoes, when well-acquainted singers and audience members meet away from the events to share meals. Leverage is also exerted through performers communicating special status with the details of their gifts. When individual cigarettes are given during the performance events, singers tend to carry them around in an unmarked tin or hand them without showing the pack from which they come, but on one occasion, Master Gao reprimanded one of the singers at the show at which he played the keyboard for being slow to offer me a cup of tea. The singer sought to make amends through the gesture of making my tea with the same kind of leaves she herself was drinking, rather than, presumably, an inferior kind offered as standard. Communicating special treatment is another way to intensify the imperative of reciprocity.

I observed that audience members very often reject packets of cigarettes; I saw them go to the lengths of thrusting a packet back into a singer's handbag, or making a show of pushing one away when it had been placed on the table in front of them, only to accept it after the singer had moved on and there was no more to be gained from protesting. The ritualized negotiation involved before a gift can be accepted has been theorized in musical contexts (Jones 2004, 250) and beyond (Gao et al. 1996, 287) not as rudeness or self-denial, but as an opportunity for the receiver to express politeness and for the giver to demonstrate their sincerity. I would add that the rejection of the gift here is also an effort by the audience member to fight against their moral status being trumped in a way that will demand reciprocity. I also encountered more unusual forms of gifts. Ganzi, for instance, painted pictures at home during the day to give to her favored customers. My judgement of the pictures I saw – a vase of flowers and a princess-like figure – was that they had an adolescent charm rather than a trained polish, and this observation again supports the idea of the flows between people being gifts not transactions. It is the very fact that

the gesture is offered, rather than its use, exchange or even aesthetic value, that is important in the gift economy.

Finally, the gift economy of temporary inequities in moral status is negotiated through language. A prevailing message flowing from the stage and in face-to-face communication is that singers are individuals enduring difficult life circumstances, and that their worthiness as people in the face of these challenges is matched by their vulnerability and dependence. One singer, Lanlan, was typical in complaining to me of the hard toil and mediocre income of performing, but said she was planning to persist with the job for the sake of her two children: "I want them to grow up in a good environment" (pers. comm., November 19, 2014). Emphasizing singers' subordinate *social* status, however, only adds to the possibility for forging temporary raises in *moral* status vis-à-vis audience members. Part of this is embedded in the wider linguistic conventions of terms of address that distinguish along the lines of gender and age. There is quite a contrast between how the young female singers and the older male audience members and other individuals are referred to. The former are invariably called by nicknames and casual forms, with the repetition of syllables (for example Dandan), the adding of prefixes (*Xiao* Fang, *A*-jing) and suffixes (Yuan-*zi*) implying them to be intimates and juniors. Males on the other hand, are invariably addressed with terms of seniority and respect, such as *laoshi* (teacher, master), *shushu* (uncle) or *ge* (big brother). Carol Ronai and Carolyn Ellis note the significance of similar respectful terms of address in the context of American strip venues. Dancers here sometimes call potential customers "sir," and they suggest that this shows the women deliberately evoking the relationship between a granddaughter and grandfather. In doing so, they argue, these workers are often highly successful in persuading their customers to treat them in the respectful way befitting such a relationship (Ronai and Ellis 1989, 280). Likewise, Master

Gao told me that audience members typically become like "fathers" to the singers they get to know well, with the feeling of *qinqing* (the affection between family members, as opposed to romantic *aiqing*) describing the relationships (pers. comm., November 20, 2014).

Again, the ultimate effect of these asymmetries can be found in patterns of reciprocity in which singers express their subordinacy by giving small gifts, good wishes, company and validation, while men are encouraged to see cash as their primary way of fulfilling the expectations that this creates. The harnessing of musical, material and verbal means frames the performances in terms of the goodness of their participants and sets up temporary inequities in moral status that build upon gender-related asymmetries in social status. This summarizes the gift economy in Wuhan's street performances.

The collective dimensions of inequities in moral status

The giving of gifts does not occur in any form of private sphere in which the two parties involved are isolated from the gaze of other people; the establishment and neutralizing of temporary inequities in moral status must also be understood in a collective context. I have already noted that the giving of a gift is almost always an overtly performed act in which the audience's eyes are on the giver, and this is reinforced by the emcees highlighting and thanking the giver on the microphone in real time and sometimes commenting on the amount given. The social validation of giving a gift, or at least of avoiding the embarrassment of failing to give at the appropriate time, is surely a part of the gift economy. The prospect, too, of being recognized as saviors plays on desire for self-validation, and this can also be explained as neutralizing inequities in moral status or seizing opportunities to raise it.

On one occasion during a performance, I fell into conversation with a singer I was meeting for the first time. She had a straightforward manner and quickly offered to give me a special imported cigarette (showing me a packet with Russian writing on it) in exchange for a cash gift the next time she took the stage. Firmly extracting myself from that conversation, I watched other men duck out of her path as she moved around the audience, presumably having picked up a similarly unfavorable impression of her forthrightness. When this singer was onstage, she approached a group of four men and sang in front of them for a moment. One man gave her a small gift, but she was not satisfied and between song lines said to the man standing next to him "You as well." Eventually, each man in the group was intimidated into giving her a gift before she moved on (October 31, 2014). The technique is perhaps based on understandings similar to those held by dancers in strip clubs observed by Wood, that some men like being approached and asked to pay for dances as it draws upon a "feeling of being important or desired" (Wood 2000, 13). Just as peer pressure is particularly noted in accounts of karaoke sex consumption in the Chinese-speaking world (Boretz 2004; Zheng 2006), the giving of tips here relies on others witnessing an individual's contact with the performer: "the power being affirmed is noticed by others and momentarily distinguishes the customer being attended to from other customers who are not receiving the attention of a dancer" (Wood 2000, 14). In other words, being recognized as on intimate terms with the performer is a way to give oneself a boost in the eyes of other audience members.

It is tempting here to try to explain audience members' apparent concern for how they appear to others by drawing on established theories of social conduct within the particularities of Chinese societies. There are obvious connections, for instance, to the idea that maintaining "face" can be a particularly strong imperative in this context (Yang et al. 2007). But scholarship

that problematizes the prescriptive link between, for example, Confucian doctrine and actual contemporary behavior is also attractive in many ways (King 1985; Stockman 2000). It opens up the discussions to other lenses, including the one that Goffman introduces when stripping social behavior back to the imperative felt by individuals to protect and seek social validation (Goffman 1963). This theoretical angle is particularly useful for acknowledging that the relationships between parties here might not be geared towards any concrete outcome in particular (for example sex), but that they perpetuate themselves simply through the cyclical dynamics of dealings between people, especially the obligations inherent to the negotiation of moral status.

The collective level of relating is not only relevant among audience members, it also brings relationships between performers into understanding the gift economy. There is clearly a sense of friendship and teamwork among singers at each event, not least because family and friendship networks are heavily involved in the recruitment of singers; I discovered that several were sisters or home-town friends of existing performers. On the other hand, there is a significant sense of competition and self-interest. Longzi was particularly candid to me about her relationship with fellow singers. She told me that there are "no real friends" because they are all involved in "competition for a living" (*shengcun jingzheng*) (pers. comm., October 23, 2014). Having previously got to know Longzi a little and established myself as *her* contact at that particular show, during one performance I happened to be exchanging a few words with another singer, whom I was meeting for the first time. While this singer was speaking closely into my ear above the music, Longzi approached from the other side and began talking into my other ear simultaneously, urging me not to associate with the other woman (October 24, 2014). This was part of efforts particularly evident in Longzi's case of seeking to undermine the reputation of other singers in a bid to gain a potential benefactor's exclusivity, including through the

accusations of sexual promiscuity that I covered earlier. Thus, singers are minded to raise their moral status not only above audience members, but also over each other, so that they can win the competition for gifts. The interpersonal dimensions of the gift economy are made all the more central to understanding these events by the implications that they have on the collective level.

Mapping moral inequities onto economic outcomes

Considering my conclusions earlier downplaying the importance of sex as a factor, what mechanisms, then, are involved in translating the personal dimensions of the gift economy into the high order of cash values given? A brief reflection on methodological issues is useful for setting up my approach to this question. Most of the discussions in the article so far have perhaps reflected the approach of "thick description" most famously advocated by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973). In a general sense, the narrative I have presented has sought to "unpack the meanings and symbols" emerging from the social behavior I studied in the field (Titon 2012, 79). But as ethnomusicologist Jeff Titon has argued, a potential shortcoming of this approach is that it produces accounts in which the scholar's voice comes through as the main authority, potentially at the expense of others participating in the social context being studied. More desirable is for ethnographic writing to bring out a sense of conversation that involves both researchers and cultural insiders who are representative of a variety of positions, and for the scholar to reflect on complexity more than to impose singular interpretations. For Titon, the processes of turning rigid researcher-informant interview dynamics into more empathetic ones of "friend, field partner, and conversation" (2012, 81) are epitomized when "researchers enter into gift relationships that require reciprocal obligations" (ibid.). The rest of this section, then, stems

from the empathetic experiences of being involved myself in the very reciprocal gift relationships that are the subject of this article.

When I was invited by A-jia to a birthday meal that she was holding for friends among regular audience members and other singers at her stage, I decided to arrive at the gathering with a birthday gift. Considering a range of potential presents for A-jia, I eventually elected to buy a pair of gloves costing around 50 *yua*n. I chose the gift by setting a budget that took into account my relationship with the singer plus my wider financial landscape. Unlike the cash gifts at performances, what I received in exchange for my chosen budget was governed by the logic of market transactions and, furthermore, the cost of the gloves was not transparent to A-jia and others present when I handed them to her at the dinner. After the meal, everyone in attendance travelled to that evening's performance, and each of the men that had been eating together took the opportunity to give A-jia cash gifts when it was her turn to sing. Influenced by this precedent (and my own genuine wish to do so), I decided to give her another gift, in the form of 100 *yuan* in cash. Wary of setting an unwanted and unaffordable precedent, I chose this amount as the lowest-value gift that convention here would deem appropriate.

At around double the monetary value of the pair of gloves, however, I felt that the size of this gift undermined the careful weighing of factors I had applied to choosing the budget for my earlier gift. I was acutely aware that had I applied the same personal economic reasoning to the cash gift and used the first gift as a benchmark, I would have opened myself up to a real embarrassment of appearing far less generous than my fellow givers to A-jia and to everyone else witnessing. Thus, although both offerings were intended as gifts, I gained a sharp sense that the second one afforded me little insulation from exposure in the negotiation of moral status; unlike in the case of the gloves, there was no transaction to mediate or cloud the connection

between my money and my relationship with A-jia. By responding to my feeling of obligation to give, I neutralized the inequities that had been set up by A-jia's invitation to dinner, by her gesture in seating me and the other diners in the best position at the front of the arena, and by her various small gifts of drinks, snacks and cigarettes as we watched the show. My act also took into account my moral status vis-à-vis my fellow audience members who had been at the dinner, all of whom offered gifts in multiples of 100 *yuan* (but perhaps significantly, had not to my knowledge given any material gifts like the gloves earlier on).

My participation in the gift economy also influenced the relationships between A-jia and a wider group of givers, as she drew attention to my special status as a foreign contact as a way of emphasizing her own worth. By the next day, A-jia had updated the headline status message to be read by all of her contacts on the ubiquitous Chinese social medium platform QQ: "My first birthday since starting, plus a special guest from Britain who gave me a lovely pair of gloves. Thanks to all of you friends for coming, and please be understanding of my neglect," the last part referring to her concern that she had been too busy to spend enough time with each friend (November 13, 2014). As A-jia had openly admitted to me previously, having a foreign visitor at the birthday celebrations would "bring me great benefits and raise my profile at the stage" (pers. comm., October 29, 2014), upping the ante in the game of status negotiations with the wider audience group.

Although not formalized as most transactional exchanges of wider economic life are, my entry into the gift economy here shows that temporary inequities in moral status can give life to their own conventions with respect to size of gifts. I certainly thought the sum of cash I felt obliged to give was out of proportion with my wider financial landscape, and that my earlier material gift reflected it more accurately. Cash tips here are not standardized and limited with

reference to the economic logic of wider life, and this means that the norms of the gift economy can fall out of line with other spheres in which participants conduct everyday economic activity. Conservations with other men in audiences throughout my time in the field revealed to me that some may indeed become diverted from their normal personal economic reason. Early on, I explained to one that I intended to experiment with giving tips as a means of establishing connections at the shows. He obviously found this idea concerning, and urged me to be cautious: "Sure, give 10 *yuan* for encouragement, but don't start spending 100 *yuan* here there and everywhere, because they make a lot of money!" (anonymous, pers. comm., May 17, 2014). Later in the conversation, the same man revealed that he had given singers a total of 1,400 *yuan* over the last two days. I am more convinced that dissonances such as this, rather than the role of sex, can account for the higher-order values circulating in the gift economy here.

Conclusion

There are various implications of thinking of the money-giving practices in this context as linked to the obligations of moral status negotiations rather than as transactional exchanges stemming from a consumer mindset. Most fundamentally, it means that the centrality of the money-giving in this kind of music event need not imply music here being detached from the specifics of interpersonal meaning. By considering some of my own concerns when participating in the gift-giving practices, alongside my observations of interactions and discourses at performances, I have intended to contribute details of the mechanism through which the interpersonal orientations of economic dealings associated with music play out. I show how the gift economy, an idea built on existing understandings of wider practices in Chinese culture and of broader social imperatives, unfolds in concrete behavior. My points about the interpersonal orientations of

economic activity can also comment on popular music more generally. Often linked to detached industrial-level processes, and sometimes maligned as a result, mainstream popular music performance is also incorporated into everyday experiences and relationships on Wuhan's streets.

I also want to briefly return to points I touched on when considering Stokes' ideas about music performance in "happening" social experiences. Scholars do indeed often take an interest in music's social *powers* and are drawn to understanding manifestations of music's involvement in *profound* moments, experiences and changes in people's lives. For those whose work engages particularly with political matters, for instance, music is studied in part because it can be "quite literally, a matter of life and death [and] can change the destinies of individuals and nations" (Bithell 2011, 237). Likewise, scholars focusing on performance analysis have harnessed Durkheimian notions of effervescence to explicate intense social effects associated with music (Turino 2008; Clayton 2009), and similar interests in music's instrumentality underlie approaches to music cognition (Ashley and Timmers 2017), to understanding music's therapeutic potentials (Thaut and Wheeler 2010), and even to analyzing its roles in everyday life (DeNora 2000). The music events addressed in this article are linked less obviously to profound issues in the destinies of most participants, and I have aimed to show that one-to-one dynamics are more significant sources of meaning here than any particular locus of intense collective belonging. I intend for the discussion, then, to highlight meaning around music performance that is not diminished by widely powerful and profound effects being less apparent. The street performances in Wuhan are part of participants' regular lives and, for those involved in the gift-giving practices in particular, they also become part of moral experience. Obligation and feelings of responsibility to reciprocate, and the dissonances that convention can inspire, may not be strikingly profound but they are certainly meaningful in everyday experiences with music such as this.

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[1] Names in this article have been changed.
[2] 200 *yuan* was equivalent to roughly USD 32 in 2014.
[3] The Chinese honorific "*Dashi*" does not carry quite the same hyperbolic tone as the English translation may.